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How to Talk with White People about White Supremacy

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A Widerstand consultant (White male) said that he often found himself talking with other White people about racism and White supremacy, and over time he noticed some patterns in what makes those conversations more effective and more likely to continue. These are his thoughts told from his first-person perspective.

1. **I've stopped trying to convince people of anything.** Rather I focus on making sure that the information and ideas I have to share about racism and White supremacy are understandable. If they can be understood, they hold their own power and saliency.

2. **I draw attention to racially specific ways of talking about racism and White supremacy.** Often light bulbs go off when White people realize that most conversations in the White community about racism (if they happen at all) are focused on interpersonal dynamics. Pointing out that members of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community most consistently discuss racism from a systemic perspective can open the way to a conversation about what systemic racism is.

3. **I've come to believe that guilt tripping is ineffective.** I've never really been successful at trying to get White people to change their beliefs by making them feel guilty about being White. It just doesn't have a very good track record.

4. **I remember how threatened I was the first time someone challenged me about my involvement in White supremacy.** Given that the ability to not to have to think about being White is the fundamental White privilege (or so I argue). Being asked to think about it in a focused manner is not only unfamiliar to most White people, but also highly threatening. Shouldn't be that way, but it is. It helps me to generate empathy by remembering my own discomfort.

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5. **I focus on the principle of integrity.** When speaking to members of the faith community, I talk about how our witness and mission as White people are severely undermined by the racist systems that serve us. When speaking with those who care about the Republic, I note that racism also undermines our traditions of democracy. Those who value honesty and integrity more generally also have been willing to talk about how the receipt of White privilege falsifies and distorts their self-perception and way of moving through the world.

6. **I try to be honest and transparent about my own struggles.** I'm careful not to slip into being self-important or condescending, but it's far more useful to show that I don't have everything figured out.

   I affirm whatever I can. If I notice a kernel of awareness, I ferret it out and acknowledge it. Again, I have had to learn not to do so in a paternalistic or maternalistic manner.

7. **I recognize that human connection is important AND that conflict is okay.** I don't do this very well, but I know that it is essential. Should conflict arise, my impulse is to disparage the other White person. Occasionally I am able to ground myself and enter conflict without becoming anxious. Many times I fail at doing so.

8. **And, finally, I have worked hard to become familiar and comfortable with the language of institutions and systems and have examples at the ready.** Again, my goal is not to convince others about their involvement in racism and White supremacy. But the more I can help others understand, for example, the racism present in real estate practices, the criminal justice system, and the health care system – to use just three such examples – the more it becomes possible that those I am speaking with to reconsider how racism operates around them.

I don't think employing these observations will always lead to transformation with our conversation partners. I do think that they hold open the possibility of growth and movement forward.

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